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SUBJECT: MUSLIM COORDINATION COUNCIL EMERGING

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Sensitive But Unclassified

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The 2006 initiative by Federal Interior Minister Schaeuble to set up a "German Islam Conference" as an official forum for exploring ways to achieve a better integration of Muslims in German society (reftel) has spurred efforts among major Muslim groups to form a single, overarching umbrella organization that aims to represent the interests of the Muslim community as a whole vis-`-vis German government, both at the state and federal level. What is now being called the Muslim Coordination Council (KRM) is slated to take over this function and may be operational as early as this summer, although a number of organizational problems remain. Observers consider the establishment of the KRM an important - and long overdue - step in the ongoing process of Muslim integration in Germany. End Summary.

ZMD Leader Confident about Coordination Council

¶2. (SBU) In a March 23 meeting with the CG, President of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD) Axel Ayyub Koehler confirmed press reports that the establishment of a new Muslim Coordination Council in Germany ("Koordinationsrat der Muslime" - KRM) is well underway. Koehler, a Muslim convert who for many years was active in local FDP politics in Cologne as a City Councilman, took credit for efforts to create this central umbrella organization that aims to represent Muslims living in Germany and would serve as a single cooperation partner for the government, on the federal, state and local level on all matters relating to Muslim integration. Koehler told us that he had been working for the last 20 years on the establishment of a single Muslim representation in Germany, but because of the diverse interests of the various groups it had not been possible until fall 2006 to bring the four leading organizations together for such a goal. He expressed confidence that a breakthrough was near and that the Coordination Council would play an important role in facilitating Muslim integration in Germany.

Member Organizations to Remain Independent

¶3. (U) The four Muslim umbrella organizations participating in

the negotiations on the establishment of the Coordination Council (KRM) are:

The Turkish Islamic Union (DITIB), Cologne

The Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), Cologne

The Islamic Council for the Federal Republic of Germany, Cologne

The Association of Islamic Cultural Centers (VIKZ), Cologne

According to Koehler, all four organizations, the most important Muslim umbrella groups in Germany, will retain their independence. Each will be represented on the governing board of the KRM, and the Presidency of the KRM would rotate among its member organizations every six months. Since all these organizations have their headquarters in Cologne, the KRM would also be based in this city (which Koehler referred to several times as the "capital of Islam in Germany"), even if this would require frequent travel to Berlin.

Statute and Rules of Procedure Still TBD

¶4. (SBU) Aside from a one-page letter of intent on the creation of the KRM, signed by the four organizations in fall 2006, the negotiating partners have not agreed on other formal documents. Koehler told us that negotiations have taken place regularly over the last few months, with meetings held at least once or twice a week. The talks are currently focusing on the

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drafting of a statute and the rules of procedure for the KRM, which will be most likely organized in the form of a registered society ("e.V.") under German association law. Although some problems remain to be resolved, Koehler expressed optimism that an agreement on these issues could be reached by summer. He indicated that negotiations had been held up in the past by DITIB's insistence (as the largest of the four organizations) on having more influence in shaping the future policies of the KRM than the other three member organizations. In addition, its affiliation with the Turkish government often required DITIB to obtain approval from Ankara before it could agree on certain points, which also slowed down the negotiations. Koehler predicted that DITIB, in order to be able to play a major role in the KRM, would eventually have to emancipate itself from the control of the Turkish government. He also maintained that many German-based DITIB leaders had begun to accept the notion that the KRM could only operate effectively on the basis of equality among its membership organizations.

¶5. (SBU) However, another source close to the negotiations told us that DITIB would obtain three seats on the future Governing Board of the KRM, while the three other organizations would receive two seats each (an arrangement that would also avoid the possibility of a tied vote). In addition, DITIB would have the right to exercise a veto on certain decisions of the KRM, our source said. Embassy Berlin has received identical information.

Positive Reaction, Support from NRW Integration Ministry

¶6. (SBU) NRW Integration Minister Armin Laschet recently called the plans for establishment of the KRM a "big and important step" for Muslim integration in Germany, but pointed out that because most Muslims were not organized under any of these groups, the participating four organizations - despite their importance - still only represented a minority. NRW Integration Commissioner Thomas Kufen, at whose initiative the negotiations on the establishment of KRM got started last fall, told us that the leaders of the four organizations will brief him and Minister Laschet on the results of their negotiations and discuss them with Ministry experts before the KRM is officially launched, as early as this summer.

Disagreements on Religious Instruction

¶7. (SBU) Kufen pointed out to us that although the NRW government is looking forward to working with the KRM on many aspects of Muslim integration, it could not accept the KRM as a cooperation partner in connection with the planned introduction of Muslim religious instruction at NRW schools. This matter could only be discussed and regulated in cooperation with local Mosque communities. The KRM was an association, and not a religious community, Kufen said, and could therefore not play a role in the ongoing negotiations, which are to prepare the ground for Islamic religious instruction at local schools in Cologne and Duisburg by the summer of 2008.

¶8. (SBU) In our conversation with Koehler, it became quite evident that he (and leaders of the other participating organizations) still hoped the KRM could serve as the competent cooperation partner for the NRW state government on questions relating to Islamic religious instruction. He presented us with an 80-page curriculum that had been developed several years ago by the ZMD's pedagogic working group for Islamic religious instruction at German grade schools, expressing the hope that this could serve as the basis for a revised and updated concept to be jointly worked out by the KRM and the NRW school authorities. Kufen stressed, however, that the NRW government would stick to its position, i.e. would not accept the KRM as cooperation partner in this respect.

Shiites but not Alevites Represented on the KRM

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¶9. (SBU) Asked whether the KRM would also represent Shiites in Germany, Koehler answered in the affirmative, pointing out that the Islamic Center Hamburg with its many Shiite members was a member organization of the ZMD. On the "Alevite Community in Germany" (AABF), which has elements of Shiism in its creed, Koehler referred to this organization as primarily a political group of former Turkish communists and leftists who used a religious cover to attract followers. It therefore had no place on the KRM, he stated. AABF Secretary General Ali Toprak confirmed to us that, contrary to press reports, his organization had indeed not been invited by the other Muslim groups to cooperate with them in forming the KRM. Toprak stressed that even if the Alevite Community had received such an invitation, it would not have cooperated, because it wants to

retain its status as an independent religious community. He added that the Alevites do not feel represented by the KRM, "neither in political nor in theological terms." (Note: Koehler referred favorably to another Alevite group, the ABAF, indicating that it is a member of the Islamrat, which would presumably open the door to its membership in the KRM. End Note.)

Comment

¶10. (SBU) The cooperation of the four leading Muslim umbrella organizations and the soon-to-be constituted Muslim Coordination Council is a significant development within the Muslim community in Germany. It is likely to facilitate efforts by the federal and state governments to achieve a better integration of Germany's Muslim minority, even if many problems still remain unsolved, in particular the issue of Islamic religious instruction in schools. The creation of the KRM will likely open a new chapter in the development of Muslim life in Germany.

Koehler's role in this process seems to arise out of his political experience and his long service in local government. His age (68) and failing health (heart problem), however, suggests that he is not likely to remain in a leadership position for long. A new generation of articulate Muslim leaders, such as Aimam Mazyek of ZMD and Bekir Alboga of DITIB, both of whom were born and raised in Germany, stand ready to move into these leadership positions. End comment.

¶11. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
BOYSE